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ABSTRACT

This essay outlines the history of social studies and the continuing push and pull of political favoritism that has marked its path since the second quarter of the century. Seen variously as too liberal, too progressive, even un-American, social studies is perhaps too sophisticated a concept for narrowly trained teachers and administrators. The social studies, says this author, is central to the development of effective citizens. (Author)

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# The 1990s: A Challenge for the Social Studies

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# The 1990s: A Challenge for the Social Studies

Richard E. Gross

*This essay outlines the history of social studies and the continuing push and pull of political favoritism that has marked its path since the second quarter of the century. Seen variously as too liberal, too progressive, even un-American, social studies is perhaps too sophisticated a concept for narrowly trained teachers and administrators. The social studies, says this author, is central to the development of effective citizens.*

(School of Education *Review*, Vol. 3, pp. 54-58.)

A strident round-robin letter of "warning" was recently addressed to the leadership of the National Council for the Social Studies by a large number of social studies educators from throughout the nation. These professionals are greatly concerned over threats to the field of social studies and the lack of positive action, as they see it, on the part of the Council to maintain the important role and position of social education in the school curriculum. Even with the current public concern over citizenship education, a basic and important element of social education in the schools, the position of the social studies remains quite low in the opinion of many people, reflecting a long-term problem of neglect in many elementary schools, especially among teachers in the primary grades. The social studies, which in several previous eras was regarded as a central and unifying element of the curriculum, today is often looked upon as not even part of the basic school offerings. To understand the present situation and possible future developments, we must understand its history.

The current unhappy conditions for many leading social educators exist because of a number of factors. First, today's negative situation reflects a failure of social studies proponents to reach agreement among themselves, as well as with teachers in the lower schools, on a clear and specific definition of the field. "Social studies" was not envisioned as an umbrella term under which to group history and social science lessons and courses. Rather, it was a conception of a new discipline in its own right wherein topical and problem units would draw upon history, the social sciences, and related areas for their content and their methods of study in the resolution of important problems, largely of a current nature.[1] Founders of the movement included historians and political scientists as well as educators. Names like James Harvey Robinson, Charles Beard, John Dewey, and Harold Rugg come to mind. Although the roots of the movement go further back, the year 1920 can serve as a suitable starting point for the present discussion.

For the next 75 years, however, most students in training to become elementary and secondary school teachers (in both teachers colleges and universities) were usually not adequately prepared to be social studies instructors. High school teachers most often had single subject majors in either history or one of the social sciences. During these years, numerous personnel having only weak minors in the field were certified to teach social studies. In many, if not most, cases these individuals had never experienced a true social studies approach in their own lower school or college preparation. Even the methods courses in which they were enrolled were often taught by historians or other academics who had little interest in, and limited experience with, elementary and/or secondary education.

Although the term social studies came to be used increasingly in the schools after 1920, the idea of a unified, conceptually distinct discipline of social education was infrequently introduced on a system or school-wide basis. And, even where social studies themes, concepts, generalizations, topics, or problem areas were listed in state and local course guides and frameworks, the actual subjects and lessons in the schools continued, in the main, to be addressed by conventional historical or social science treatments.

Most teachers rely on commercially published textbooks for the organization of their courses. Whether or

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is a somewhat open question. Publishers produce what will sell. Some past (and even present) examples can be found of texts and/or series which do mirror the idea of social studies, but they are few in number. Also available in fairly large numbers have been supplemental type booklets which frequently were problem-centered, but they have never gained large-scale use. Consider one series as an example. A number of volumes for junior high school level social studies were produced in the 1920s by Harold Rugg and a number of cooperating students and teachers. Published by Ginn and Company, they did achieve an initial popularity in the early 1930s. They fell victim, however, to attacks by business and conservative forces across the country who saw the books as promoting socialism and "un-Americanism." School boards gave in to the attacks and the texts disappeared from the schools.

The demise of the Progressive Education movement, which began during the Great Depression, marked a continuing struggle for educators who desired to promote a truly effective program of social education. World War II and a subsequent "digging in" mentality further limited social studies efforts. After the war, a strong citizenship education movement developed in the United States, but it did not contribute to any significant extension of social studies courses. Citizenship lessons and experiences were viewed as an adjunct to the traditional curriculum and were often conducted as extra activities or as special assignments within history, geography, and civics classes.

During the Vietnam debacle and the accompanying ferment that occurred in many schools, public concern over the weaknesses in the educational program grew materially. In addition, the political and public reaction to Soviet space achievements brought a steadily increasing demand for school improvement. The resulting National Defense Education Act eventually made funds available not only for mathematics, science, and foreign language programs, but also for new developments and reform in social studies.

The results were amazing. Within a period of just a few years, over 60 new and experimental efforts in the field of the social studies were developed and made available to teachers in elementary and secondary schools. Most of these projects involved the social sciences, providing a rich opportunity for the creation of individual courses or entire K-8 or K-12 programs. Exciting materials became available in anthropology, economics, geography, sociology, or in combinations of two (and sometimes more) of these disciplines. Many of these programs and courses, organized along social studies lines, were aimed at issue-centered topics and involved interdisciplinary learnings. Some drew from pertinent subjects outside of history and the social sciences. Many institutions and workshops were organized to help elementary and secondary school teachers build the backgrounds and skills to succeed with what came to be known as the "New Social Studies."

Then, in the 1970s, this writer conducted a national survey of the field. It revealed a leveling off (and in some places a decline) in numbers and enrollments of students in certain traditional courses such as World History. There was also evidence of specialized mini-courses being developed, as well as a growing number of electives being offered in the social sciences. Findings suggested a number of predictions, since proven erroneous, that the long-time stranglehold of traditional history and social science offerings was about to be shattered (Gross, 1977). Within a few years, however, the exuberance, ardor and reform-oriented experimental attitude, as well as almost all of the innovative projects of the 1960s and early 1970s, disappeared.

I will not explore in detail here the factors that led to the demise of the new social studies, but several factors suggest caution for present day would-be reformers:

- There appeared too great a variety of offerings, some of which conflicted with each other;
- Implementation was often incorrect and underfunded;
- The wrong offerings oftentimes were developed for the wrong grade levels;
- Opposition appeared from parents and various pressure groups who did not understand what the many projects were trying to achieve;
- Many teachers were unprepared to teach and/or rejected new materials and content that required the use of methods with which they were unfamiliar;
- Many of the new instructional materials were too difficult for students and/or teachers;
- Commercial textbook salespeople failed to properly promote the new programs once they were available to be purchased;

- In a number of cases the retirement or movement of key instructors in or from a key school district was fatal;

- Finally, there was a damaging lack of administrative interest and cooperation in promoting and working with those teachers who piloted project materials.

Some of the programs and courses were truly innovative. Undoubtedly, they would have proved of high interest to many students had they been given sufficient exposure to the ideas and materials the projects contained. Unfortunately, almost all of the projects now gather dust in storage areas or have disappeared completely from the educational scene.

The failure of many of the new social studies projects to connect adequately to the current world, to the emerging concerns of young learners, and to the human needs and societal issues of the day, as well as to the local community, were underlying factors in the lack of long-term acceptance. Change, however, is difficult, and curricular change is no exception. It should be understood that a long entrenched and rather static K-12 curriculum easily resists criticism and change. Prime evidence in this regard can be found in the 1983 report of a task force of the National Council for the Social Studies that recommended several possible basic curricula for the field, but eventually favored a highly debatable scope and sequence. After several years of study and consultation, this committee emphasized a program that did not deviate significantly from that to which most elementary and secondary school students had been exposed since the 1920s and which reflected the oft-cited 1917 recommendations of the NEA Commission on the Social Studies (Dynneson & Gross, 1986).

In the 1980s and, it now appears, the 1990s, there has been a growing interest in reinstituting "pure" history and, to some extent in the elementary schools, traditional geography into the curriculum. This development has come primarily at the expense of broad field social studies offerings and some social science courses. Historians such as Diane Ravitch (Teachers College, Columbia) and Paul Gagnon (University of Massachusetts), as well as influential professionals such as William Bennett, the former head of the U. S. Office of Education, and Bill Honig, the Superintendent of Schools in California, have been leaders in this movement. Influential organizations such as the Bradley Commission on the Teaching of History and the National Geographic Society, along with several academic societies, have contributed funds to projects and publications that have helped lead school districts into program revisions that may be designated as conservative or traditional. The American Historical Association and a number of other societies sponsored a culminating report on this trend, which was published in 1989 (National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools).

As explained, much of the foregoing has been a reaction to the curricular experimentation and innovation that followed the era of the Vietnam War, as well as a long-time antipathy to the idea of the social studies by some academics. Initially, in the 1970s teachers were swamped with so many curricular options growing out of the period of the new social studies in the 1960s that some feared curricular anarchy in the field. The important and interesting point that many of the current critics and school reformers of the last decade have failed to note, however, is that much of what they feared did not happen. In spite of the rhetoric and revisionist writings that appeared during the 1980s and the many new possible substitute offerings for traditional history, the majority of schools and programs changed but very little.

If one examines carefully the curricula of most schools during the last twenty years, typical programs held sway and were not characterized by a large number of radical changes. Indeed, as stated previously, a great number of history, geography, and social studies courses have never deviated far from what the new reformers seek! This holds in spite of the fact that numerous student surveys have long revealed negative reactions against typical memoriter name, data, and event "catalogs" which are designated as history courses and texts. In most schools, the term "social studies" continues to mean traditionally organized history, geography, and government courses.

Meanwhile, public concern over the increasingly uncivic behavior of many youth--self-indulgence, juvenile crime, teen-age pregnancies, and drug use--has led many citizens, school critics, and academic essentialists to designate a scapegoat. Instead of, for example, identifying malfunctioning families, unequal economic conditions (especially for minorities) and other evils as possible culprits, it was easier to complain of the failure of the schools. Such blame in the areas of youth citizenship, character, and ethic development was directed especially at the social studies.

Therein we have the major reasons behind the move to return to (or keep) history and geography courses of a traditional nature. These subjects are envisioned as prime promoters of sound values and good citizenship in producing young people who live in terms of time-tested national standards. As a result, many state and district curriculum guides currently indicate a greater emphasis upon conventional his-

tory organized in a chronological approach. Fewer topical, thematic, problem-centered, and interdisciplinary courses are to be found. What is missing, however, is any truly valid and reliable proof that traditional history and geography offerings produce the attitudes and behaviors that the critics desire. Curricular decisions continue to be "armchair committee" agreements based on little, if any, solid research. Young people generally do not find typical history (or for that matter, many social science) offerings to be relevant and worthwhile. There remains a danger that they may receive more of the same fare.

A division occurring largely within the ranks of those who wish to promote history as the dominant element in the social studies curriculum adds to the current ferment. There is considerable debate as to what themes and topics history should emphasize and how the blocks of historical study should be organized. Considerable disagreement exists as to the amount and kind of U. S. history vis-a-vis including more global features; there is also disagreement over the incorporation of special emphases in lessons and courses devoted to such topics as Asia, women, and minorities. There is disagreement over the extent to which United States history should feature its western backgrounds; its handling of blacks and their roots and contributions, or pay attention to other multicultural aspects (Winkler, 1991).

As to the question of what is the proper content to be included in social studies programs, it should be noted that history and geography can provide core information and skills related to the social education of children and youth, but that there are serious doubts as to the efficacy of these subjects to promote good citizenship education as traditionally taught subjects. Actually any social science discipline from anthropology to social psychology can be a satisfactory carrier of true social studies ideas. Such courses and lessons are certainly not purely objective, disciplinary attempts to produce little social scientists and/or historians. Instead, they meet the broader demands of general education. Accordingly, such lessons and courses strive to incorporate a balance between conservative, progressive, nationalistic, and global viewpoints, as well as facts, skills, and values.

The key elements of any social studies offerings should provide a basic contribution to the socio-civic education of children and youth. They should help to develop young citizens who understand and value the democratic process, who can employ a variety of competencies in attempting to resolve difficult social and personal issues, who value diversity and realize the inevitability of differing beliefs and opinions, who believe in human rights, and who hold and act in terms of society's basic moral codes and ethical values. These are the fundamental criteria upon which to base and to judge any social studies program. A great problem, of course, is that few proponents of any particular curriculum or approaches that are claimed to enable student attainment of the foregoing aims have the necessary proof to back their claims. The current and continuing dilemma over the definition and the content of the social studies is likely to remain with us for some time to come. No matter how deeply held the opinion and how heated the charges and exchanges of viewpoints, no one can prove at this stage the efficacy of any organization of content or approach. Much more valid and reliable long-term research needs to be conducted to begin to verify the claims of the various protagonists. Such research could provide a sounder base to support the presently spotty and conflicting evidence now forwarded for these differing positions.

Meanwhile, the important interim challenge is for historians and social scientists to reach some accommodation concerning their beliefs and attitudes relating to what would constitute a successful social studies program or programs in the schools. We need to know where we have come from as a people, as well as why and how. All solutions as to what should be taught in the schools need to include some elements of our national traditions and values. But there is a corollary demand that the skills of critical analysis and wise decision-making related to contemporary problems such as economic inequality and urban blight, so important to both students and teachers, have to be taught. Again there is a call for balance in any reorganization or amalgamation of subject matter. Beyond this, and more important in the minds of concerned leaders in several camps, is the need to reach mutually satisfactory agreements between scholars in the academic disciplines, teacher educators, and school teachers. All three groups need to understand better the problems existing in local communities and schools if we are to reach agreement concerning the issues which must be resolved

So long as teachers to-be are merely lectured to in a traditional manner by political scientists, economists, and historians, (not to mention many professors of education), there will be a continuing void between the concept of social studies and teaching practice in the schools. Several education courses and a brief teaching practicum do little to provide understanding, let alone to infuse the idea of a true interdisciplinary social studies, for prospective teachers who have been taught primarily via separate and unconnected subjects for more than 16 years of their previous schooling. Many social studies teachers do refer to

themselves as such; but they often in reality remain rather narrowly focused instructors of history and the separate social science disciplines. History and social studies frameworks and guides in some states and districts do suggest a properly balanced socio-civic program; in others, however, there is a clear push to retain a traditional separate subject organization. An examination of many textbooks selected for state and local use reveals them to be primarily instruments for factual regurgitation. Numerous national, state, and locally developed tests further discourage hopes for an exciting and worthwhile involvement of students in social learning.

Lastly, among the previously mentioned challenges to the attainment of the kind of social education that youngsters will accept as both worthwhile and interesting is the need for professionals of all kinds and at all levels to find ways to work together and with others who are concerned about youth and the schools. It is not enough merely to inform them or solicit the support of parents, local organizations, business groups, legislative bodies, and the media. We need to develop a variety of joint efforts--study groups, cooperative programs, and school community projects. These are essential to develop shared insights, and to promote agreement on common directions and joint action.

Indeed, some of the research that has been proposed as needed to make certain proper decisions about the nature of social studies may well prove unnecessary if the foregoing suggested elements of training, organization, decision making, and cooperation occur. What kind of a social studies curriculum and appropriate instruction could be attained if university professors in history and the social sciences approached their subjects as broadfield social investigations, involving students in problem assignments and adjusted their courses and requirements accordingly for those who are to become teachers? What improvements might appear if state credentialing regulations provided for adequate depth and breadth in academic subject preparation for teachers? If schools of education became practicing partners with schools in their communities? What difference would it make if cooperating master teachers, comfortable with the idea of social studies, were assigned by administrators to teach social studies classes? What might happen if teachers and administrators were encouraged and enabled to work openly and cooperatively (with adequate resources) in concert with community leaders to promote the teaching of social studies?

The above suggestions are fundamental aspects of any overall design to improve the social studies curriculum. Realistically, the attainment of such goals will probably come over time only in piecemeal fashion. Nevertheless, the social studies is the area in which to begin. Social education lies at the very heart of general education in our schools. The socio-civic education that social studies can provide is central to the development of effectively operating citizens in a free society.

**End Note**

[1] The fundamental elements that make up social studies lessons and courses include: 1) the societal goals of the United States, 2) the heritage and values of civilization, 3) the key concepts and processes of history and the social sciences, 4) the dimensions and interrelationships of today's world, 5) the skills of inquiry and decision-making, and 6) the personal and social needs of children and youth.

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